

LORE FERGUSON WILBERT

FOREWORD BY MATT CHANDLER

HANDLE

WITH CARE

HOW JESUS REDEEMS THE POWER
OF TOUCH IN LIFE AND MINISTRY

LORE FERGUSON WILBERT



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OF TOUCH IN LIFE AND MINISTRY

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Introduction

he house was built in the late 1700s, crumbling plaster and creaking floorboards its proof. In the back room is a small woodstove, and it is here I have one of my first memories. It is my neighbor's home.

I am two years old, and it is a frigid day outside and nearly as cold inside in this uninsulated back room. An older child (My brother? My babysitter? A neighbor?) pulls off my winter boots, takes off my striped snow encrusted mittens, and shimmies me out of my red snowsuit, as I stand there shivering, waiting for what's next.

I feel the warmth of the woodstove to my back and I begin to lean into it, whipped suddenly forward by this older child's hands. "Don't touch that!" they yell at me.

My face crumbles into shock and fear. I don't know what I've done wrong, but I feel the wrath in their warning. "It's hot! It will burn you." I am still young enough that I don't even know what "burned" is. I turn and face the warmth again until I am yanked back again, and my chapped and cold hands are slapped for disobedience.

My first memory in this world is being told to not touch something without knowing why, and many of my memories since have been confusing because of the same warning: *Do not touch*. It is not lost on me that I was slapped to keep from being burnt, hurt to keep from being hurt. From my first memory, I have been confused about touch.

I am not alone.

In the Old Testament books of law, there is a form of one statement made thirty-eight times: “Do not touch.” There are rules about razors that should never touch heads and laws about hands that shouldn’t touch parts of the tabernacle. Laws about not touching the sick, bleeding, feeble, and diseased. Mandates about not touching work on the Sabbath and not touching the belongings of wicked people. Rules about not touching particular animals, not touching women during their menstruation cycles or after they give birth, and not touching a man’s semen. Laws about not touching holy things and unholy things. Not touching holy men and unholy men.

Touching so many things was forbidden to most of God’s people. Only the high priests were allowed to handle what was considered holy, and only after extensive cleansing rituals before and after.

But a curious thing happens in the New Testament when Jesus begins His ministry:

He touches.

Jesus touches the feeble and the women, the bleeding and the unclean, and the heads of adulterous women. He heals on the Sabbath using His hands. He touches the diseased

and the children. He allows Himself to be touched too, by unclean people, women, snot-nosed kids, tax collectors, and sinners. On the last day before Jesus' crucifixion, we even see Him reclining with John, who leaned back against Him to ask a question. Jesus came to fulfill the law and to make what was unclean, clean. And one of the ways He did this was through touching. Even a woman suffering from bleeding twelve years merely *touched* His robe and she was made clean and—this is important—He knew He had been touched because He felt the power go out of Him. He felt the *cost* of the touch.

To touch is to be vulnerable and to be touched is to be vulnerable too. I think of a friend of mine who adopted a newborn and sat in a Neonatal Intensive Care Unit for days, her shirt undone, the babe pressed against her bare chest. The baby not of her flesh becoming part of her flesh, exposed, but for the sake of another. For the sake of his health, his maturation, and his attachment, she became vulnerable for him.

This is what Jesus did in the New Testament. He became the most vulnerable by having His body touched most wickedly, ten-inch nails driven into His flesh, thorns digging into His scalp, stripped naked, a spear thrust into His side. He gave His body to be broken, to be handled in weakness for the sake of righteousness. The crucifixion was the cruelest and most life-destroying form of touch a person could ever experience.

The resurrection was a different story. Three days later when He rose again, one of the first acts of the risen Lord is an invitation to life-giving touch. The weak-faithed Thomas

said, “If I don’t see the mark of the nails in his hands, put my finger into the mark of the nails, and put my hand into his side, I will never believe.”¹ So Jesus invited him to do what? *Touch*. Place his fingers in the marks of the nails, put his hands on the spear-pierced side.

In the presence of weak faith—a wholly intangible thing—Jesus says a most tangible thing: Touch and be touched.

Most humans are born with all five senses—taste, touch, hearing, smell, and sight—but of the five, touch is one of the three fully developed at birth.² At birth, it is touch we need most and most instantly. Sight, smell, taste, hearing, these can and do wait—developing over the next few years. But touch, and the lack of it, is felt immediately. I believe God created us this way on purpose.

We’re in a time in history when on one hand, reports of inappropriate or sinful touch are commonplace, and abuse is tragically alive and well, even in the church. In these cases, touch has been forced, and it causes all sorts of damage. On the other hand, we are also living in a time when even a mere glance can be interpreted as sexual harassment. For fear of being touched the wrong way, any indication of warmth or interest or even friendship is warded off and labeled as wrong.

Parents are anxious about touching even their own children for fear of repercussions years away. Or sometimes children shirk from their parents’ touch or parents withhold it

¹ John 20:25.

² <https://infantino.com/blogs/the-baby-monitor/sensory-development-your-baby-s-first-year-milestones-infographic>.

simply because it's uncomfortable, or they're not sure how to express it healthily. Rule upon rule exist in nurseries, schools, and youth groups to prevent even the hint of anything inappropriate—and still, reports of abuse are common.

As for opposite genders, especially in the church, quick side hugs or no hugging at all is the norm. Marriage is happening later and later for many, and those in prolonged seasons of singleness have no outlet for healthy human touch. And if a marriage does take place, all touch is interpreted as sexual or foreplay, and because of this paradigm, it is withheld or taken wrongfully.

We go through life tense with anxiety, unhappy with life, and afraid of so much. Because we are critical of touch we don't understand, we end up dealing with these things by paying for touch from strangers in the form of massage or pedicures, when most of us probably just need a hug from someone who actually knows and cares for us.

Hugs alone—or intentional firm touch, like massage—have been proven to lower stress, lower heart rates in adults, regulate body temperature in infants, and lessen fears. Merely ten or twenty seconds of firm contact between adults, adults and children, children and children, and even humans and animals, can accomplish all of the above. A hug!

Yet, as the squeamish looks I get when I mention this book project indicate, most of our thoughts immediately run in the direction of erotic touch when we talk about touch at all. It's as if we cannot separate good, healthy, normal human touch from what we envision to be its most intimate case scenario—or its most perverted forms. Sexual touch is not

a worst-case scenario, but since sexual touch is meant to be reserved for one man and one woman within the confines of marriage, it has a limitation on it in time, space, and person, and limitations scare us.

Since the garden of Eden, we have pressed back against limitations and added to what God has said. In Genesis 2, God did not say Adam and Eve could not *touch* the tree of knowledge, only that they could not *eat* from it. But Eve added to what God said when she answered the enemy's question, "Did God *really* say, 'You can't eat from any tree in the garden?'" "God said, 'You must not eat it *or* touch it, or you will die,'"³ Eve responded. We've been doing the same ever since.

Most of us are legalists from birth and to protect ourselves, we draw the lines farther and farther from the truth. Sexual touch is meant solely for marriage, but God did not say we cannot touch our fathers and mothers, brothers and sisters, children and friends, uncles and aunts, pastors and congregations, old folks and young ones, singles and marrieds, and the list goes on. For fear of sinful sexual touch (erotic touch outside the covenant of marriage), we limit all or most touch.

Yet our bodies are very literally *aching* to be touched.

John Piper shared a story years ago about a woman who would cut herself intentionally on her abdomen and need to be taken to the emergency room. This happened several times and once when he was in there to visit her, he had a conversation with her. His experience went like this:

³ Genesis 3:1–3, emphasis added.

“Can you give me any light or help on what goes on in your head? Why are you doing this?” And what I remember she said was, “I like it when they touch me in the emergency room.”

So here’s one analysis of one person—namely, me. And I don’t want to generalize this. Here is a woman who . . . probably felt very alone, very untouched, very unloved, very un-cared for. She watched the whole world going its way with people hugging each other and loving each other and having friends or being married. And she had this unbelievable ache in her heart to be cared for, to be pitied, to be touched and ministered to. And her unhealthy way of doing it was to hurt herself.⁴

Piper goes on to mention that there are probably people out there who haven’t been hugged in a decade or more—one of which he even spoke with in his church. He finishes by saying:

It was just so revelatory for me for a moment that there are people who actually go through life [like this]—and they are good people! They’re not eager to jump into bed as a

⁴ John Piper, “How Would You Offer Hope to Someone Who Is Addicted to Cutting Himself?” *Desiring God*, February 9, 2010, <https://www.desiringgod.org/interviews/how-would-you-offer-hope-to-someone-who-is-addicted-to-cutting-himself>.

prostitute or to fool around on the weekend. They know they're going to be pure—but they're not ever touched. Nobody ever touches them. And so I thought, “Boy. God, make me a good hugger. Make me a good, clean, pure, trusted, pastoral hugger.” And I'm probably not the best at it. Some people are like hugging trees, and others like hugging big panda bears. And others like hugging bean bags. Some people are just really good at hugging. And I just want to be one of those.⁵

What does it mean to be a “good, clean, pure, trusted, pastoral hugger”? In an age when touch between two people, adults or children, is almost always taken or received as its most inappropriate form, what does it mean to be good at touch? Clean in our touch? Pure touchers? Trusted touchers? And pastoral in our touching?



In this book, I will walk us through eight scenarios in which we will need to practice touch throughout life. I say practice because this requires learning what isn't natural, much in the same way we practice musical scales or practice a sport. Our practice of touch in culture and the church is woefully underdeveloped and I want to help us think critically and biblically about the example Christ set for us.

⁵ Ibid.

I will say this again and again in this book: my aim will not be to give you how-tos or examples of healthy touch. This is not the purpose of *Handle with Care*. My emphasis is always going to be on how we *care* more than on how we *handle*. I am concerned first about the hearts of the reader before the hands of the reader. If you're combing through this book looking for prescriptive advice about how to specifically touch children, spouses, friends, or neighbors, what's permissible and what's not, you won't find it. This is on purpose.

Because I am this book's author, I will also weave my personal thoughts, ideas, and story throughout each chapter, including a chapter sharing my experience of touch throughout life. I cannot help but be informed by my own story; and while my story may not be common, ordinary, or the rule, I cannot divorce it from my perspective and still bring empathy to this book. "The danger of this approach," as Zack Eswine says in *Sensing Jesus*, "as with any of us who seek to testify about God in our own and others' lives, is to leave the reader with more of a sense of us than of Jesus. On the other hand, the danger of eschewing a more personal approach is to try to point us to Jesus as if he has nothing to do with the real sights, sounds, and providence of his creation under the sun."⁶ My narrative within is not meant to be prescriptive, but merely descriptive of the experiences God has used to inform my view of Him and the interactions with people Jesus had in Scripture. We are embodied people, and as Jen Pollock Michel would say, "the lessons we often best absorb

⁶ Zack Eswine, *Sensing Jesus* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2013), 25.

are the ones we learn with our senses.”⁷ This is true for all of us, regardless of how disassociated from our bodies we feel at times. I hope my story will not only lend empathy to how I speak about touch, but will also create empathy in you as you read *Handle with Care*. Even more, I hope reading this book creates empathy in you as you interact with your own body and the bodies around you.

What could it mean for the family, singles, marriages, the church, the community, and the world to have good, healthy, pure, faithful, ministering touch? Where is our faith weak concerning this? Perhaps our faith is weak in this area because we have not been touched enough. Perhaps it is because we have been touched sinfully and we cannot find freedom from this act against us. Or maybe because we have touched sinfully and our conscience condemns us. Or perhaps because we’re squeamish about germs or strangers or snotty-nosed kids or women with breasts or men who won’t let go. I don’t know. I can’t know. But I do know that somewhere in the mess of our beliefs, assumptions, and fears about touch, there is something whole and beautiful and good and God-given in there. As Jesus shows us with His own life, there is ministry in touching.

⁷ Jen Pollock Michel, *Teach Us to Want* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press Books 2014), 136.

CHAPTER ONE

Using Our Hands to Live

*Touch has a memory.*¹

—John Keats

We used our hands in our home—to speak, punish, work, play, and love. And it was not an undemonstrative home. It was a rowdy, creative, busy household, and I was the only girl of eight children.

Thirty years ago the ten acres on which we lived in Bucks County, Pennsylvania, was grown thick with trees and covered with boulders, brush, and bloodroot. It was the perfect place to raise a brood of boys and their tomboy sister. At night we lay tangled in crocheted blankets around the living room listening to my mother read aloud, and those stories came alive

¹ John Keats, “What Can I Do to Drive Away,” *Complete Poems and Selected Letters of John Keats* (New York: Modern Library, a division of Random House, 2001), 361.

during our day. We were cops and robbers, orphans and bandits, pirates and sailors. The last words we heard when heading out to play were: “Don’t come back until dark unless you’re bleeding.” We knew that quite literally to mean we were not to come back unless we were quite literally bleeding—which was an often-enough occurrence that the emergency room at our local hospital knew the Fergusons by name. I don’t think any of us has broken a bone or needed stitches fewer than eight times each.

We were a tactile bunch then and now, as adults scattered throughout the United States with our respective spouses, significant others, and children. When we get together at my mom and her husband’s house, I am not there more than ten minutes before I have an adult brother rubbing my shoulders, poking me in the side, or dropping a languid arm around my shoulders.

I may be the second oldest, but I am without question the shortest, a fact about which my youngest brother—twenty years my junior—finds every opportunity to mention. He was fewer than two pounds when he was born nearly three months premature; I could once cup my hand in a C shape and tent it over his entire torso, my fingertips touching on either side of his NICU incubator mattress without my palm and the fragile skin of his chest touching one another. I’m delighted his now fully-grown man arms can rest atop my head when I visit.

Even though we were happy as a rowdy and tactile family, there was sometimes an aggressive atmosphere in our male-dominated home that didn’t fit my disposition. At a young age I was aware that the way I touched and wanted to

be touched was somehow different and foreign from the way our household treated it. I didn't like to wrestle. I didn't even like it when my brothers wrestled. I didn't like to be shoved and shuffled. But I also didn't like to be kissed on my cheek or neck as my dad was prone to doing. I was deeply uncomfortable with the assumption that everyone ought to welcome touch in the manner in which it was initiated. I believed if someone wanted to tickle me (which I despised then and now), I had to accept that my bigger and stronger brothers would pin my arms down and I would be tickled. The same went for wrestling: if one wanted to engage in it, the assumption was the other *had* to engage in it. The same for kisses on my neck from my dad or a hug from one of my brothers. If I said no or expressed I was uncomfortable, I was made to feel guilty for not being tougher or not being the kind of little girl who *liked* her daddy's kisses. Permission to say "no" wasn't given, wasn't even an option. Touch was non-negotiable. And that made it something I endured more than I appreciated.

Touch wasn't always this fraught for me, though. As a small child, I remember loving it when my mother would rub small circles on my back or scratch my arm while I was draped across her lap. This strong woman birthed eight babies and the option of not being touched for one single second of the day might have been a welcome one, but she never refused our request for a back-scratch or a hug. I still think of her enveloping hugs when I hug someone today. They were warm and ample and tight, the way a hug ought to be.

This is not a memoir or a tell-all, so, reader, you'll have to forgive my vague allusion to certain details of the story,

but at a young age I was sexually abused. This is when, if I trace my memories back correctly, my aversion to being touched without asking for it began. The asking became an important piece for me, a piece I couldn't recognize until less than a decade ago. Because something was taken from me without my permission, I began to conflate all forms of touch with someone taking something from me. In a way, that made sense—after all, good versions of touch are supposed to be healthy both in their giving *and* their reception simultaneously. But in my case, the touch hadn't been healthy—it was taken, not given. I began to steel myself against the coffee-breathed kisses of my dad, the beer-battered hugs of my grandfather, the cigarette-soaked kisses of one uncle, the cologne-scented hugs of another uncle, and the touch of any teen boy with the musk of dirty socks, Old Spice, and weed.

The only adult male I welcomed a hug from was my horse-farming-construction-working uncle who always smelled of sweat and earth, horse manure and hard work, with a tinge of red wine. His touch I trusted. As I grew, I would add more and more people to the list of those I trusted with touch, but I treated many as if they had to earn it.

Finding and Dodging Trusted Touch as a Young Adult

The list of those I trusted grew when I had my first kiss at age thirteen. I had never heard the terminology “heavy petting” until my family ventured into the most conservative

ilk at the time—the homeschool culture of the 1990s—but my middle school boyfriend and I took that phrase to its most intimate levels using a different terminology. He laughed at me for not knowing what first, second, or third base were, and then introduced me to all three of them one week when our families were vacationing together. That we remained virgins in the technical sense is a miracle to me.

Like most middle school romances, we lasted only a few weeks, after which we didn't talk for months until he sent a letter to me expressing how sorry he was for his actions. Somehow it never occurred to me that I also owed him an apology. Though we were both young and I was certainly impressionable, he didn't "take advantage of me" against my will. Yes, our touch was immature and wrong. And yes, neither of us knew the long-term consequences of what we were doing. But we didn't know at thirteen years old that legally speaking, minors aren't considered able to give consent. As far as we both knew, this experience was mutual in every way. He was the introducer of the sin, but I eagerly took part, interested in it, wanting to go along. Though many young teen girls may have been uncomfortable or fought off the advances of this boy had they been in my shoes, I didn't. I liked it, and I was just as culpable for our actions.

That brief middle-school romance awakened something in me. It awakens in all of us at some point, I suppose, but in our fumbling hands and hot breaths under his sleeping bag, I had experienced my first orgasm and it was electrifying, terrifying, and addicting. I was naive enough to think this strange jolt of pleasure was going to result in pregnancy. I

nearly held my breath until my next period, crying with relief when it finally came.

This began a years-long battle with masturbation and a history of either no touch at all with boyfriends or the opposite—nearly unhindered touch. I was unable to remain ambivalent about touch.



Around this time, I met the girl who has been my closest friend ever since. We were neighbors and we became inseparable. My own home was brimming with the male anatomy, but here, in her, was my likeness, my mirror. For the first time in my life I was fully comfortable with my body. There was never anything erotic in our love for one another. It was simply the beauty of commonality, something I'd never before experienced.

We would sleep squeezed against one another in her slanted ceiling bedroom at night, staring at the plastic glow-in-the-dark star constellations above us. We would hold hands while we walked or talked, and hug every time we saw one another, which was every day. We thought nothing of changing in front of one another, using the bathroom in front of one another, or jumping into or out of the shower while the other was there. My body was comfortable with her. Fully. Completely. Not inappropriately. Not sexually. Simply the experience of being.

When I was eighteen, my family moved six hours north of our childhood home and, shortly after, one of my younger

brothers was killed suddenly in an accident. My childhood friend was on my family's doorstep as quickly as possible, and while I woke weeping all night long that first night, her body curved at my back, her hand brushed my sweaty hair back and her fingers tracked my tears down my face. This kind of selfless love was and still continues to be astounding to me. Besides my husband, she is still the one with whom I am most comfortable physically. She knows me completely and loves me. When we grew up she became a massage therapist, and she still gives more freely of her touch than anyone I have ever known—there is a strange kind of purity in it. It is one of the most profound expressions of *phileo*, brotherly love.² Familial love.

In this moment of agony, I needed human contact. This is something I think Jesus understands about mourning. Though my ailment at the time was not blindness, this friend's actions reminded me of Jesus when He healed the blind men in Matthew 20:29–34. When He sees their distress, their utter brokenness, and their inability to comfort or heal themselves, He doesn't pray for them from afar or simply yell "be healed!" from the other side of the room. Instead, we're told that "moved with compassion, Jesus *touched* their eyes."³ When Jesus is undone over human suffering, He comes close and He touches. Yes, His moments of healing were not just one-off instances of compassion; they were pointing to the nature of God's Kingdom that was afoot. When He touched and healed, it wasn't for mere show—it was pointing to

² John 11:3.

³ Matthew 20:34.

something much greater. But still, when moved with compassion, Jesus *touched*. And He usually touches in the particular place of pain or lack—for these men, it was their eyes. In suffering, Jesus gets closer than a family member would, but in the purest of ways. As I look back, I can see this is the type of compassion my friend displayed for me.



I had boyfriends throughout my teens and twenties, but the relationships weren't very affectionate. After all, I was the product of a conservative homeschool culture, aged fifteen when the bestseller *I Kissed Dating Goodbye* was released. It turns out, if you read that book, you didn't only kiss dating goodbye, you kissed kissing goodbye too. In fact, there was a collective fear of *any* kind of physical touch in *any* relationship before marriage within our purity culture. And, like every good product of legalism, we took everything to the extreme. This meant most of my relationships were short-lived, secretive, or so physically restrained we could barely brush shoulders with one another without feeling guilty.

In my early twenties, my most serious boyfriend and I couldn't figure out why we made such great friends but couldn't make all the love stuff materialize. I look back now (with no regrets) and see why. We barely touched one another. I was terrified of "giving my heart away"⁴ in the form

⁴ A popular phrase we used in talking about relationships, and one I've found that many people use, though I cannot find an original source for it.

of holding hands. He was unwilling to “awaken love until the appropriate time”⁵ in the form of small kisses or caresses. So our entire relationship was made up of delight and deep conversations and an unbelievably deep fear of expressing our affection for one another in a physical way.

Meanwhile, the trust of touch I had lost as a child was in many ways revived, and my brotherly love for everyone else in my life—male and female—was effusive. I was known for my warm touch; my mom’s gift of giving enveloping hugs had been imparted to me and now my hugs even had their own nickname: “Lore Hugs.” Yet in the relationship I cared most about (my boyfriend’s and mine), I withheld touch completely. Most of my future dating relationships would follow the same system of thought and practice.

Confidence and Confusion in My Twenties

I had moved out of my parents’ home shortly after my younger brother was killed and my youngest brother (the two-pound preemie) was born. This began a stint of living with over thirty-eight different roommates until marriage. Thirty-eight different women in various stages and stations of life. Some worked full time, some worked three jobs, some were in college, some in graduate school, some were in recovery, some weren’t believers, some were my best friends, some felt like a blip on my life radar. But all of them mark my years of singleness.

⁵ Song of Solomon 8:4.

Something happens when we live in long seasons of singleness: Many of us begin to feel starved of good, healthy, edifying touch. I wasn't living with family anymore. And I wasn't in middle school anymore, squeezing together on a twin bed with my best friend at night talking about dreams and boys under glow-in-the-dark stars. I've never had that kind of relationship with another friend. But with all these roommates, I knew healthy touch had to be possible and good. I made it my aim to welcome the human need for physical touch among my roommates and engage my own felt need.

I had no idea that what seemed like healthy familial touch for me (someone who came from a roughhousing household) could be a land mine for someone else.

A back rub, sitting close on the couch while watching a movie, spending the night at the other's house, sitting on the other's lap playfully—all these behaviors were common in the all-female houses in which I lived for fourteen years as a single person. We were effusively physical with one another. No one ever said it was inappropriate and I think we would have laughed if anyone had said it, and just snuggled more. We were the same gender, after all, and since touch with boys was *off limits*, who else were we supposed to touch and who was supposed to touch us?

The Purity culture of the '80s and '90s bred the physicality of same-gender friendship among my millennial friends. Our touch seemed platonic, good, familial, healthy, even necessary. We weren't receiving healthy, warm, and biblical forms of touch from anyone else—parents, brothers, pastors,

and so on—so we were forced to find it in each other. It was the only place a human could touch another human without suspicion. To feel “turned on” by this kind of touch among same-gender friends would have been absolutely foreign to most of us. That is, until it happened to one of us. And then it was happening everywhere.

In my late twenties and on into my thirties, woman after woman after woman would come to me in tears, confessing what they had thought was healthy physical touch among same-gender friends had turned into something strangely sexual, and now many of them wondered if they were lesbians. They were all saying many of the same things: *we were just watching a movie and then . . . , we were just scratching each other's backs and then . . . , it was late and I stayed overnight and then . . .*

Shame was written in the faces of these women, most of whom had spent their adolescent, teen, and college years dreaming of boyfriends, husbands, and babies, not wondering if they were attracted to their own gender. And yet, here they were, feeling the chemical rush of endorphins and oxytocin that happens when we touch another human intimately. They were thrust into a confusing existential crisis because the one area of touch that seemed okay, permissible, and safe for a good, Christian girl, was bringing on feelings they never would have entertained before. Feelings they only associated with illicit touch because it elicited *feeling*—they felt *felt*. And they assumed feeling felt must be wrong.

If touching our same gender could lead to this, was there any place touching wasn't troublesome?

As I headed into my late twenties, I found the reluctance of touching boyfriends begin to creep over in touch toward almost all men in general. I felt uncomfortable with the touch of pastors, professors, ministers, father-figures, and brothers—and not necessarily because I was uncomfortable, but because they seemed to be. I couldn't explain why then, but looking back, I know it's because I had a growing awareness that the female body was somehow a possible threat. Not in the way my thirteen-year-old body had been with another thirteen-year-old boy, or in the way I'd been abused as a child, but in a, "*Danger, keep away!*" way, and this time *I* was the danger.

I was watching women fall into affairs with ministers, pastors fall into sin and lose their ministry, and men I trusted as father-figures seem a bit creepy with their touch toward my friends. We were women with burgeoning bodies, suddenly comfortable with who we were, no longer awkward or uncomfortable college students trying on different masks for size and fit. Our confidence was attractive to men and somehow terrifying to them at the same time. We'd been sold a lie that men couldn't control their animalistic lust so women were the real problem, the prey who had to protect themselves *and* the predator. I had no idea at the time that human females weren't made by God as animalistic prey, and human males were not made by God as animalistic predators. I didn't understand that the sexes were not beasts, but instead, image-bearing *women* and *men*. And those are totally different categories.

I began to view myself as a threat because that's how I felt men perceived me. I didn't feel like a threat. I felt like a person, a human, a woman. I had breasts, yes, legs, thighs, a laugh, and a personality. I felt like a whole person, but I also felt like there was no middle road between a forced front hug with a man I didn't know or a quick, awkward side hug from a pastor or male friend I'd known half my life. It seemed like the ones with whom I shouldn't have been a threat saw me as such. And the ones who knew nothing about me thought nothing of squeezing me toward themselves in a locking grip from which I couldn't escape or breathe. It seemed like my ability to control who touched me and how, was gone. Human touch felt backwards to me—not touching those closest to me, and at the same time, being forced to touch those who had just met me. Bear hugs were happening in introductory conversations with strangers, but were off-limits to those who were like my brothers. It was as though I was an inadvertent threat by nature of my gender or a forced participant in a touching game I didn't want to play.

Two Engagements and One Marriage in My Thirties

In my 32nd year, I began dating and quickly got engaged to a man I'd known for several years. Even as I look back now, I'm still confused as to what was going on in my heart and mind during that time. There weren't a lot of physical boundaries with us—I was intent on throwing off the legalistic tendencies of my teens and twenties, and felt no guilt

about kissing. He hadn't had a girlfriend in fifteen years and I think the newness of it all got to both of us. Our engagement lasted a few months before I called it off. No matter how hard I tried, I couldn't obtain the mysterious sense of certainty my married friends seemed to have had about their spouses, and I wanted it. I was a child of divorce and knew marriage could be hard, yet meant for a lifetime, I wanted to know that I knew that I knew. And I didn't know.

There was also sometimes an element of lust on my behalf with him that I couldn't reconcile with the love I knew I was meant to have for a husband. I wanted to be touched and kissed, and being touched felt like taking a long, deep drink from an endless well. I just didn't want to be touched by *him*. And I hated this about myself. It was one of the most humbling years of my life, coming face-to-face with my own sins, lusts, fears, insecurities, disappointments, and more.

This man's touch, though, awakened a realization in me, and it wasn't just lust. It was the realization that it was possible to touch as an unmarried couple without losing your virginity. This reality seemed to buck the Purity Movement's main message: touch before marriage was always likened to a car drifting downhill, impossible to stop. One second you're just holding hands and the next you're having the best sex of your life. In this relationship, though, I learned it was possible to show restraint and respect, to say, "Wait. This isn't honoring you or me. Let's redirect our attention." I learned touch could not only be permissible within dating, but also truly good, helpful, healing, and even holy. Yes, as is with any kind of relationship, there were impure motives and moments. But

on the whole, as it relates to the physical moments of our relationship, I can say we operated in purity, discernment, and self-control. We were able to be both *affectionate* and *Spirit-led*, two things I once thought were mutually exclusive.

Even as I still wrestled with the public shame of a broken engagement and lost relationship, I had no idea that God was about to usher me into that beautiful certainty I desired.



On an autumn evening, I met my husband-to-be in our church's foyer and it was a non-event for both of us. I have no recollection of our conversation. Nate remembers I had just gotten home from a trip to New York⁶ and New England, and another trip, this time to Israel, was on the horizon. He was at the end of a long season of waiting and reflection after his divorce was finalized. He and his former wife

⁶ I realize I'm mentioning a lot of different geographic locations where I lived at various junctures of this story. Just to help you, reader: From 1980–1998, I lived in Bucks County, Pennsylvania, a suburb of Philadelphia. From 1999–2003, I lived in Potsdam, New York, on the outskirts of the Adirondack Mountain region. In 2003, I spent most of the year living in Central America teaching English, and then moved back to Potsdam, New York, until 2005, when I moved to Chattanooga, Tennessee, to finish my degree in English. After I graduated in 2007, I moved back to Potsdam, and lived there until 2009, when I moved to the Dallas-Fort Worth Metro area. I lived in Texas, until the evening of my wedding, when we moved to Denver, Colorado, where I was on staff at a church there, and then had to suddenly move to Washington, D.C., for my husband's position with the United States Postal Service Headquarters. After a year in D.C., we returned to Texas. If you're keeping count, that's ten cross-country (or global) moves.

had been separated for a few years at that point and, though there were biblical grounds for their divorce, he had signed the papers in grief. On top of the emotional and spiritual loss he was undergoing, he was also learning what it meant to go without the kind of sexual touch in marriage he had grown accustomed to for twelve years. Nate describes that time as “white-knuckling it at first, followed by a sweet time with the Lord where He revealed He was enough.”

We went on our first date six months after meeting. Three months later to the day, we were married. I imagine those who had watched me get engaged quickly the year before were probably shocked we moved that quickly. But we were surrounded by our closest friends, cheers from all, and the abundant blessing of our church and pastors, along with the certainty that we knew that we *knew* it was the right thing.

Nate led in dating and engagement with purity, showing restraint at every step, and caring for my body as though it was not his, or even mine, but God’s. We married quickly partially because we knew we were going to get married and exercising physical restraint was difficult, but also simply because we could. Our engagement was just long enough to do the required premarital counseling with our dear friends, an elder and his wife from our church who would marry us. It was no longer than that on purpose. We knew our desire for one another was pure and without lust, but we didn’t want the enemy to get a foothold in our pure desire. We tried to be aware of our sinful propensities and set boundaries for them.

We joke about it now, but Nate's vehicle, a VW Touareg, had so many different alarms and beeps. One for unbuckled seat belts, one for when the weight shifted on the passenger seat, one for if the car was running too long without seat-belts buckled in—and none of them stopped. It was June in Texas and turning the car off while we kissed wasn't an option for the 100-degree weather. So when the annoying beeps interrupted us, we called it a move of the Holy Spirit and thanked God. Even though we were thirty-four and thirty-eight, we wanted to see things like the car, the presence of roommates in both of our lives, self-imposed curfews, or other restraints, as God's provision for us against taking a gift before its time. Contrary to what some seem to suggest, Christians never get to an age where we somehow grow out of needing to obey God's design for sexual experiences. Age is never an excuse for disobedience.

Only by God's grace were we able to get to marriage not having had sex with one another. I phrase it that way on purpose. It is only ever by God's grace that anyone comes to marriage a virgin or is able to show restraint with their fiancé. I'm grateful that God took me on a very specific journey before marriage, where He showed me my sins of selfishness and lust, taught me to be restrained, and yet only brought me through singleness by His grace alone. Virginity wasn't the prize I gave my husband on our wedding night, and sex wasn't the prize he gave me—all of it was grace, grace, grace.

Married but Mismatched

Right after we were married we were the stereotypical new couple in some ways, holding hands, standing close, having a lot of sex (although in many marriages, this experience isn't as common as most people expect it to be). All my years of being untouched now culminated in this new marriage where touch was both beneficial and permitted. There was one problem though: my husband didn't love physical touch as much as I did. Any kind of physical touch in public seemed to make him uncomfortable. He was never rough about it, but he'd pull his arm away if it tickled or turn his head away if he didn't want me to touch his beard. Nor did he offer touch in private often or enthusiastically. I'd ask for a back-scratch or massage and he'd do it half-heartedly for a few minutes and then stop. He was generous with his touch if we were moving toward sexual intimacy, but during the monotony of the day, he was stingy with affection and I was starving.

I felt confused. Wasn't this supposed to be the wide pasture of marriage? Touch wasn't off-limits now, so why did it seem to be such a tender thing? Was he embarrassed by me in public? Didn't he want to be seen touching me?

I had believed that marriage was the one place touch would be unhindered. Yet Nate believed physical touch was always sexual in nature and didn't have a box for touch that wasn't foreplay leading to sex. His family, though stable and dear, was not physically affectionate when he was growing up and his previous marriage hadn't been either. Touch was reserved for sex.

My experience with touch, though, had mostly only ever been for companionship. I was free with my touch, not only with him, but with other brothers and sisters in appropriate ways. He would say he was awkward with it. He had just learned to practice intimacy with men within the past few years in terms of confession, accountability, and good, honest hugging. He barely knew how to hug a woman without it being quick, clean, and from the side, if he hugged at all. He wanted to learn and grow in these areas (and he did, quickly!), and I wanted to grow in respecting his comfort level for touch, but it took a lot of communication between the two of us about what we liked and didn't. Why we thought public affection was good or awkward. Why we felt a need to be touched or not touched in certain ways at certain times. I had to learn that although we were one flesh, he was still my brother and neighbor in Christ and a human with different preferences than me. He had a sensitivity to all touch, in fact, not limited to human or mine specifically, but even to fabric he didn't like or a clothing fit in which he didn't feel comfortable. And he had to learn that although we are one flesh, I was still his sister and neighbor in Christ, and a human with different desires than him. For me, that meant a high desire for physical closeness, frequent and varied kinds of touching—most of which were not related to sex at all.

The Story You Are Living

This is my story up to present day. All of this has formed me and how I view, use, and receive touch from others. But

touch is an infinitely complicated thing. Just small slivers of my story show how complex, layered, and difficult it is to navigate. I am a northerner writing this from Texas. I was single for thirty-four years and now I am married. I am a wife but not a mother of living children. I am a sister of only brothers. I have been sexually abused. My parents are divorced. I am an introvert. I have very few close friends but many, many acquaintances. Those are the things I bring with me to this topic, but you probably bring a whole different history with you. My story is complicated differently than your story.

You're a pastor. You're a pastor's wife. You're single. You live in the city. You are a college student. You have a disability. You are a mother of many. You are a father of none. You have many siblings. Your family is small. You have a sexual history. You've never kissed anyone. You have been abused. You have been raped. You have been loved. You hate hugs. You hug everyone. You spank your kids. You loathe corporeal punishment of any kind. The list of what makes your experiences unique could go on and on.

Your story is infinitely complex and different than mine, and this one book can't give answers to the complicated stories, narratives, and journeys we're all on with touch. For me to give you a list of to-dos or never-dos regarding touch would be to fail from the onset. So, in the rest of this book, as I've said before, I will not be giving you how-tos regarding touch. It will never be my aim to give ten steps to touching or tips for touching appropriately. If you finish this book and that's what you've gotten, I've failed. If you picked up this

book looking for that, please know right now, I won't give it to you. My aim again and again will be to show you to the grandness of God, His love for you, His love for others, and how that should *inform* how you *think* about and practice touch. My goal is to broaden the pastures of touch in which you run.

My ultimate goal is this: I want to make you *think* about how you touch, who you touch, why you touch, where you touch, when you touch, and what you touch—but never to *tell* you how, who, why, where, when, or what to touch. As Paul David Tripp says, “We cannot simply offer people a system or give advice on how to deal with their past. We must point them to a powerful and present Redeemer. *He* is our only hope.”⁷ My aim is to point you to Christ and implore you to think about how He was touched and touched others, and to allow His actions and His love for you to bear weight on how you give and receive touch.

In many ways the following chapters will be a mere primer on touch, meant to raise questions without completely answering them, to offer wisdom and general guidance, but not necessarily specific guidelines. My intention is to simply begin a conversation that you take back with you into your life and your faith community to consider, evaluate, and grow in together.

I get my take on touch from Scripture itself, and though there are clear lines in some places, more often the Bible offers us more of a descriptive look at touch than a prescriptive

⁷ Paul David Tripp, *Instruments in the Redeemer's Hands* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2002), 12.

outline for each and every scenario we find ourselves in. Just as there are many descriptive portions of Scripture that we can discern as accounts of sin (slavery, polygamy, incest, etc.), so will there be biblical descriptions of touch that we must take the time and care to morally discern as well. This means we must choose to walk in humility, trusting the Holy Spirit to give us wisdom when we ask, discernment when we're confused, healing when we need it, forgiveness for where we've sinned, and help for all the ways we use our hands to live.

We are all going to have to walk carefully among these ideas. I hope after reading this, you (and I, as I do the seemingly impossible task of unearthing some lies and trying to find some redemption) will be able to think more clearly about the complication of touch, the beauty of it, the need for it, and the ministry of it.